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A BRIEF HISTORY OF WICCA - by Sally Morningstar and Peter Mills

The Nature Goddess

Way back in our distant past the tribal healer, wise person, shaman, or herbalist would not necessarily have been known or identified as a witch. Local dialect names would have been applied to them such as the 'cunning man' or the 'wys wyf' of Old England, the 'Strega' of Italy, or the 'Incantatrix' of Ancient Rome, for example. Further back in time, wise folk would have been known by many and varied names. It is within these hazy mists of antiquity that we must search to find the origins of witchcraft.

Fertility in the natural world was vital to our ancestors. If the crops failed, if livestock numbers fell, or if no new babies were born, the tribe would die out. Fertility was life itself; its absence was total extinction. Therefore, the concept of fertility and motherhood was embodied in the form of a great Earth Mother. Stone Age man carved beautifully crafted images of the fertility and nature goddess still worshipped today by Wiccans. These figurines, called "Venuses", indicate that witchcraft, as a religious belief, is at least thirty thousand years old, and perhaps older.



The "Venus" of Willendorf from Europe, about 30 thousand years old



"The Sorcerer", a cave painting dating back approximately 20 thousand years

Images of a male consort or "husband" to the Goddess have been found dating back a similar age, complete with horns or antlers on his head as a sign that he represents not only human beings but also the entire natural and animal world. There is an example of this on a wall of *Les Trois Freres* cavern in France. This cave painting, thought to be about 20 thousand years old, has been nicknamed "The Sorcerer" and shows an upright human figure with a horse-like tail, a beard and large antlers on his head. When farming arrived, these ancient gods were expanded into this new domain and became deities of the crops and harvest, the rain and sun, the flocks and pastures, the fruits of the earth and the seasons.

The Warrior Aristocracy and the Birth of God

It was the discovery of metal at the dawn of the Bronze Age that tilted the spiritual balance in a new direction. Those who possessed sharp bronze weapons came to dominate the population. Chieftains and kings gathered armies to extend their power even further and so gave rise to a new type of social order within society - the warrior aristocracy. The temple friezes and stellae of Egypt, the clay tablets of Nineveh and Babylon, the Vedas and Upanishads of India and the Hebraic scrolls of the Talmud that became the basis of the Old Testament of the Bible, record a succession of violence, butchery, battles, wars of conquest, territorial disputes and invasions all beginning at the time metal was discovered.

During this period of violent and bloodthirsty cultural upheaval, God was invented in the Middle East, the best-known record of this being the Old Testament itself. The male-dominated warrior kings of the Metal Age required a strong male god, because in their world the male was the lord of creation. Only sons, not daughters, could carry the inheritance of a bloodline to the next generation. In order to ensure that every son was recognised as the child of his father, with no possible doubts about lineage, the warrior society controlled sexual union by enslaving women. In all realms over which the single male god hovered, women were made the subject of stringent male laws to ensure that no impregnation could occur other than by a woman's 'legal owner'. Penalties were severe. In the Bible we can read that a woman caught in adultery would be mercilessly stoned to death. To this day under Islamic law an adulteress still faces the death penalty. Women became the property of men, a situation demanded by the religious beliefs of the warrior caste. The ancient and more compassionate belief, however, the Old Religion of humankind, in which the Ultimate Creator was female and women the leaders, never entirely vanished from the face of the Earth: it became known as witchcraft.

The First Healers

From the remotest known eras of human history up to the present day, every tribe, village and community had its "wise-person", either male or female; its "witch-doctor", the medicine man or woman; the driver-away of demons and ghosts and the curer of ills and ailments. These people have been grouped together under the epithet "witch" and their various skills as "witchcraft" for many centuries. The existence of these people right up to the present day is living proof that pure science cannot supply all the needs of human society.

The general condemnation of village witches and shamen by official state religions, is the outward result of the inbuilt reluctance that powerful people have of sharing their power. Whatever religion achieved power; it jealously claimed to itself all magical and miraculous occurrences. If healing happened to one of the faithful, it was a miracle and brought glory to the religion; if healing was brought about by someone else it was declared the work of the "Devil" because it could not be claimed as an ornament of the faith.

The knowledge of all natural things, plants, berries, roots, fruits, leaves, herbs, and crystals, was the lore of the wise, as well as the ability to make magic and cast out evil spirits. When the nature Goddess and Horned God were worshipped by humanity, the wise-person was held in great honour. Healing on all levels, whether mental or physical, was their most important skill within the community and - since it involved exclusively natural ingredients - the practitioner was believed to be highly esteemed by the Goddess and Horned God of nature.

The Historical Evidence

After the First World War, a distinguished archaeologist and anthropologist, Dr. Margaret Alice Murray (1863-1963) was drawn to investigate witchcraft after returning from excavations in Egypt. She approached it from the point of view of an historical and anthropological research project. In 1921 she published a remarkable and influential book *"The Witch-Cult in Western Europe"* and followed this up some years later with *"The God of the Witches"*. These books helped to bring witchcraft to the attention of the modern world and began to generate an enormous popular interest in the beliefs and customs of witchcraft.

Dr. Murray advanced for the first time as a scientific theory that what was popularly referred to as witchcraft, was actually the survival of a pre-Christian fertility and nature religion once widespread before being driven "underground" by the hostility of Christianity, and still surviving within our folklore and old traditions. For example, the custom of dancing round the maypole is the enactment of an ancient pagan fertility rite. One survival of the Old Religion proves that it continued to be important to the ordinary people throughout Saxon, Norman and mediaeval Christianity. There are old churches everywhere with small ornamental carvings of figures of a stylised woman in a sexually overt pose, from six inches to two feet in height, representing the prehistoric pagan fertility goddess worshipped by witches. Known to archaeologists as "sheelas" from their Celtic name *Sheela-na-gig*, there are over seventy in Ireland and twenty-three in mainland Britain, most of these in Christian churches. In at least one surviving example, at the eleventh century church of Whittlesford in Cambridgeshire, there is also a depiction of a male partner, a naked man with an animal's head, possibly representing the Horned God.

In his book *The Lost Gods of England* (1957) Brian Branston remarks: *"There can be little doubt that we have in the sheela the actual representation of the Great Goddess Earth Mother on English soil."* He goes on to add: *"What may be surprising is that the 'idol' should so clearly retain characteristics which go back to the figurines of the Stone Age."* He also gives the significant statement: *"That the cult of the Great Goddess did not end with the Middle Ages but still flourishes today is indicated by the resurgence of 'white' witchcraft, 'wicca', in Great Britain... there are certain modern wiccan rites which are traditional with roots going back to the Middle East of at least 2500 years ago..."*

The Wise Pagan

Christianity, like all new imported ideas, took root most readily in the great ports and trading centres such as Londinium Augusta (today's London). In the rural areas, the Old Religion continued to survive. Even today, country people are considered to possess quaint customs and manners, older values and ways of life. This division between town and country was even more pronounced in older times, and the Latin word for country dwellers was *pagani*, from which the word pagan originated, meaning one whose lifestyle and beliefs were of an older and more firmly established variety than those of the towns and cities.

After the Roman withdrawal, Britain entered a new age of barbarism in which so few records were made that it became known as the Dark Ages. During this time Christianity became extinct in Britain and any herbal and medical lore was retained largely in the folk medicine of the local cunning man or woman. Eventually the Church of Rome sent a new wave of missionaries to convert the pagans of these islands and to re-establish its presence. Slowly at first, the native pagan religion was ostracised and then outlawed altogether. It became dangerous for anyone to retain loyalty to the Old Religion. The old ways began to be observed in secret. Thus, under church and state persecution, followers of the ancient religion formed an underground movement that met in secret at remote locations.

The Anglo-Saxons, whose language was a form of German rather than what we would now recognise as English, had a name for such followers of the Old Religion, part of whose belief were the practices of healing and natural magic. This name was *wicca*, pronounced today as "wikka" (the masculine form is *wicca*, the feminine *wicce*) but in Anglo-Saxon correctly pronounced as "witcha". From this word came a more modern version, **'witch'**.

The Persecution of the Old Religion

The earliest known written reference to witchcraft is nearly as old as writing itself, contained on a clay tablet from the reign of King Hamurabi of Nineveh dated to around 1700 BC. It was not until well in to the Christian era, however, that authorities began to recognise witchcraft as a belief that was opposite to that of the established church, worshiping and honouring female instead of male power, and fertility and physical joy instead of celibacy and guilt and therefore, in their view, a belief that should be discouraged and stamped out.

During the early years of the Christian revival in Britain following the Dark Ages, Christianity and paganism had co-existed with little conflict. In the middle of the tenth century, King Edgar ordered every priest in the land to promote Christianity with the utmost zeal. A little later, the witan (council) of King Ethelred directed that wherever witches, magicians and certain other offenders were found in the land, they should be "...diligently driven out of this country..."

Anglo-Saxon England was defeated by the Norman invasion of 1066. Duke Guillaume, who we know as William the Conqueror, publicly stated his own disbelief in witchcraft. Nevertheless, four years later when Hereward the Wake and his guerrilla army were successfully defying the Normans in the marshes of Cambridgeshire, William was persuaded, rather against his better judgement, to engage the services of a local witch as a possible means of dislodging the rebels. This plan collapsed together with the high wooden tower built for the witch to stand on in order to aim curses at the Saxons: the witch was plunged headlong into the swamp. In the early 1400's as the dark ages faded into the Renaissance that was spreading across Europe, society began once more to expand its knowledge and understanding. One influential character of that time was Paracelsus, an alchemist who, like Hippocrates, was a significant contributor to the medicine that we know today.

Medical treatments during this time were increasingly becoming the province of the alchemists, who were known to use mental patients and prisoners in their quests to find new chemical cures. These experiments involved (amongst other things) the treatment of syphilis with mercury (quicksilver) a highly dangerous poison to the human body, but adequate enough results were achieved to merit continued experiments by these 'quacksilvers' as they were known. It is from here that we get our word 'quack' to describe anyone who works with as yet unproven medical hypotheses. During the reign of King Henry VIII, there was so much confusion about the law when it came to the divide between the rising influence of the alchemists (medical scientists) and the more traditional botanical therapists (herbalists) that he passed an edict which stated:-

*"...it shall be lawful to every person being the King's subject, having knowledge and experience of Herbs, Roots and Waters or of the operation of same, by speculation of practice within any part of the king's Dominions, to practice use and minister in and to any outward sore, uncome, wound, apostumations, outward swelling or disease, according to their **cunning**, experience and knowledge in any of the diseases, sores and maladies before-said and all other like to the same, or drinks for the Stone and Strangury, or Agues without suit, vexation, trouble, penalty or loss of their goods...."*

This confirms that the practice of herbalism and healing by the 'cunning folk' (witches, heathens, pagans and shamen) was still acceptable during his sovereignty, although during his reign he also introduced the first Witchcraft Act (1542). In those days witchcraft was not classified as it is today. The term witch was intended to be derogatory and literally anyone could be branded a 'witch' just because a neighbour didn't like them, or because they had a physical affliction, or perhaps the local cattle had just been struck down with a disease. The blame nearly always fell on a nearby 'innocent' who had nothing to do with witchcraft at all. The increasing suspicion aimed at anyone who was in any way different from the norm led in part to the atrocities committed during the witch-mania.

It was not really until the reign of Elizabeth I, however, that serious witch hunting began in England. The sudden dramatic increase in witchcraft phobia at this time was brought about by the return to England of the "Marian exiles." These were large numbers of extremist Protestants who had been forced to flee from England when the Roman Catholic Mary Tudor, Elizabeth's predecessor, came to the throne. These religious fanatics had sought refuge in the Calvinistic towns of Europe, such as Geneva and Zurich, where fierce witch persecutions and burnings were already raging. When Protestant Elizabeth was crowned, it became safe for the exiles to return home again, bringing with them extremist continental notions about the nature of witchcraft and the way in which it should be eliminated.

In Europe and Scotland, witchcraft was defined as a heresy; a crime against the church, and the punishment for such a crime was to be burned at the stake. In England, though, it was defined as a crime against the state, and the punishment was hanging. English Christians who found themselves to be on the wrong side, such as archbishop Cranmer, were burned; English witches were hanged.

The Witchcraft Act of 1563 was replaced in 1604 by another Act that was even more severe and which remained in force until 1736 when it was replaced by a new law that actually forbade the prosecution of anyone performing witchcraft, stating that there was no such thing, and instead making it an offence for someone to *pretend* or *claim* that they were witches. This enlightenment was a result of the flowering of the "Age of Reason" in which learned people became more interested in the developing world of science. Charles II took a tolerant view of witchcraft and was far more interested in the scientific proceedings of the Royal Society, of which he was the patron.

The last English execution for alleged witchcraft was that of Alice Molland who was hanged at Exeter in 1684, and the last witch to be condemned to death - although the sentence was never carried out - was Jane Wenham of Walkern in Hertfordshire who was tried in 1712. Under the existing law at that time the judge, one John Powell, had no alternative but to condemn her to death, since statutes had to be obeyed, but he managed to delay the execution until by his own efforts he was able to secure a royal pardon for her.

The propaganda campaign of the Christian Church against witchcraft was so successful, so merciless and was applied for so many centuries, that it forms a distinct undercurrent in society to this day. It is this legacy that forms the root of so many of the misconceptions of witchcraft that are still accepted as true by large sections of the population - for example, that witches are

Satanists; that witches worship the Devil; that witches perform human or animal sacrifices; that witchcraft is evil; and that witchcraft is a blasphemous parody of Christianity. Witchcraft is none of these things, although the accusations have remained firmly planted in the depths of public consciousness, fertilized by the Church and the media, and from time to time the old hysteria bubbles to the surface again.

The Emergence of Wicca

While the law of 1736 forbade prosecution for witchcraft in England, it did not altogether remove it from the statute books. What it did was to abolish it as a religious offence and officially disclaim the supernatural or occult powers of witches in the light of the increasing scientific reasoning of the period. Instead, the law punished those accused of witchcraft (far less severely than before) for maintaining the *pretence* that they were witches at all, thereby reducing the "crime" of witchcraft to one of fraud if a person claimed any kind of special magical powers. The proper definition of a real witch is a person, male or female, who observes the Old Religion of the Earth Mother as goddess and the Sky Father as god, anciently envisioned as the Horned God, the Old Religion being that which was practised and believed in prior to Christianity.

However, regardless of the true nature of witchcraft, no parliamentary law could eliminate the negative beliefs about its practices that had been drummed into the average person for so many centuries by the Christian church. Sporadic incidents of "witches" being hounded and sometimes killed continued to occur for a long time after 1736.

Across America in the 1800's the 'regular' or acceptable doctors were getting increasingly annoyed at the popularity of herbalists and other healers, so much so that in 1847 the American Medical Association was established, which effectively eliminated any non-regular practitioner from performing any form of medicine. In this way alternative medicine virtually disappeared from the United States for the next 60 years, held only in existence by the Native Americans and other folk traditions.

In the United Kingdom the picture was largely the same. In 1854 the Medical Reform Bill put before parliament was intended to ban the practice of herbal medicine unless individuals were registered with the British Medical Association. There was a united uprising against the Bill and it was dropped, thus allowing the continuance of the practice of herbal medicine up to the present day.

On some levels this was a good idea, because it stopped any misuse of power by dubious practitioners, but on the other hand meant an insidious erosion of the witch's healing status within society, so much so that secrecy had to shroud witchcraft's practices for hundreds of years. From these horrendously dark times of persecution, there gradually rose the phoenix of Wicca as we know it and practice it in the present day. However, the negatively biased title of "witch" is almost automatically bestowed upon witches, even today. The proper definition of a real witch, however, is a person, male or female, who observes the Old Religion of the Earth Mother as goddess and the Sky Father as god, anciently envisioned as the Horned God, the Old Religion being that which was practised and believed in prior to Christianity.

The Wiccan Revivalists

This modern emergence of witchcraft was driven essentially by two people; Dr. Margaret Murray whose popular books we have already mentioned and Gerald Gardner. Many others made significant contributions to the spread of knowledge and interest in the subject, but these two individuals remain paramount.

Gerald Brosseau Gardner (1884-1964) had a deep interest in the religious customs of the tribes he had encountered in the Orient. It is believed that Gardner was a member of a witchcraft coven based in the area of the New Forest in Hampshire. This would have been a "Traditional" Wiccan coven, one of those groups following the Old Religion that had survived throughout the centuries down to the present day. It is thought that Gardner was initiated into witchcraft in 1939, by a woman named Dorothy Clutterbuck.

Gardner was also associated with another existing coven located at Bricket Wood near St. Albans of which the High Priest was a man called Charles ("Charlie") Cardell. During the 1940s Gardner published a book about witchcraft called *High Magic's Aid*, but because claiming to be a witch was still a criminal offence, this highly accurate book was written in the form of a novel. After the Second World War in order to comply with the newly formed United Nations Organisation and its *Universal Charter of Human Rights*, Britain was obliged to repeal the last Witchcraft Act of 1736. This disposed of the legal restriction on openly publishing books on witchcraft written by witches themselves.

In 1954 Gerald Gardner published what was to become his most influential book, *Witchcraft Today* in which he affirmed that, despite centuries of persecution, groups of witches were still thriving throughout the country. He immediately received floods of letters from interested people, and many were initiated into witchcraft by Gardner and his High Priestess – the late Doreen Valiente - and later went on to start up covens of their own. Within a few years there were groups of witches all around the country.

Gardner, however, did not teach the identical kind of witchcraft that was being observed until his time. One theory holds that his parent coven in the New Forest had told him he must keep some of their rites and customs secret. This cannot be proved. However, Gardner fashioned for himself and his followers a newly formed variety of witchcraft, drawing from old pagan sources including many aspects of Traditional witchcraft, for which he made use of the ancient Anglo-Saxon word for "witchcraft", Wicca.

It is perfectly possible that traditional covens prior to Gardner called what they were doing Wicca, but it was Gardner who proliferated the term and who became the greatest influence on the growing spread of witchcraft during the 1950s. This led to an explosive flowering of Wicca during the 1960s when people were searching for new values and beliefs after the imposed austerity of the post-war era. The type of witchcraft that Gerald Gardner promulgated soon came to be called Gardnerian Wicca, and today this is probably the most commonly encountered variety of witchcraft.

Other forms of Wicca were soon branching off the main stem established by Gardner. During the 1960s Alex Sanders with his wife Maxine founded what was to be named after him as Alexandrian Witchcraft. Sanders incorporated into his system many elements drawn from branches of the occult, such as the Qabbalah (an ancient Hebrew occult system) and the inclusion of Judeo-Christian "words of power" written around the edge of the working circle. There are also Dianic Wiccans who, taking their name from Diana, one of the many ancient names for the witch's goddess, are female-oriented covens in which few or no men are admitted. There are, however, no vast divisions within the general religion of witchcraft, or Wicca, as there are for example between Catholics and Protestants in Christianity. All witches regard their individual varieties of the Craft as being branches and twigs upon the main family tree of witchcraft that has its main trunk rising throughout recorded history and its roots buried deep within the earth of our prehistoric past.